DO OUR POETS HERALD NEW GOLDEN AGE OF SONG?

Amy Lowell, Ardent Champion of the "New" School, Says America Is Yielding Ever Increasing Appreciation to Its Singers — Many Earnest Artists Now Gaining Audience.

By Edward Alden Jewell.

THERE is a future for poetry in America.

Amy Lowell, one of the most brilliant exponents of the new school, says so emphatically. She says America is only beginning to wake up to its own cultural possibilities. The attainments of culture are all to be made actual, and a nation which has been engrossed in the vast process of establishing itself will find time later on for the cultivation of those arts without which life for so many spells only a condition of futility and sordidness.

"The Republic is arousing itself already," she declared. "Poets to-day have a better chance. A wider appreciation is waiting to receive them and appraise them."

"Do you think poetry here is likely to become subsidized?" I asked, half convinced that such practical and concrete coöperation as that must represent a kind of poet's Nirvana.

"I sincerely hope not," she replied. "I most sincerely hope that nothing of the sort may ever come about. Struggle is very much better. Without struggle there is no distinction in survival. If the odds against us are great it is safe to assume that only the worthy will finally achieve. And that, surely, is as it should be. There are many poets, but, as always, there can be only a few great poets.

"I cannot but think," she continued, "that this is the beginning of a new poetic era in America. I should rather call it the beginning of the beginning. We who are writing to-day are but laying a foundation for those who will follow us. We are just in art's vestibule, and the work of those who follow will be more wonderful than ours. We are the voices crying in the wilderness. Others will perfect what we have begun.

FECUNDITY IN NEW SCHOOL.

"It is a time of great unrest. There is a mighty movement afoot which is directed toward true goals of achievement. There is a wonderful fecundity in the new American school. Much that is produced may prove abortive, but I firmly believe that out of so many ardent attempts some genuine triumphs must come.

"There are many brilliant young poets at work here now—too many, of course, to enumerate exhaustively. There is Edwin Arlington Robinson, a very great poet, one imbued with what Arnold called 'high seriousness.' And there is Robert Frost, of extraordinary originality, who manifests a fine fidelity to truth, follows the best traditions and employs an excellent style. Edgar Lee Masters has written one of the most noteworthy novels in all our literature. It is called 'Spoon River Anthology,' and is done in bald vers libre.

"There is Louis Untermeyer, who has not as yet tried any innovations, but whose work is impregnated with modern feeling, and who, in 'high seriousness,' approaches Robinson. Josephine Preston Peabody is producing some of the finest lyric verse in modern literature, following classic lines, however, and not writing in the newer style. There is John Gould Fletcher, a poet of extraordinary imaginative power, who is working along the lines of the most advanced modernists. I think the most perfect examples of pure vers libre built on Greek classic models to be found in the English language are being produced by a young poet who signs herself 'H. D.'

TECHNIQUE IS NECESSARY.

"What American poets need is a more thorough education in the rudiments of their art. Think of the labor which must be spent in any other art before technique is developed to a point rendering interpretation possible. Just as much study should be spent on the mechanism of poetry. It is all nonsense to talk of being a born poet and to argue that this alone is required—that the 'born poet' is prepared, from the very start, to turn out poems that are great and will be enduring.

"I think the English poets, as a rule, are better founded in their art than American poets. Development of technique is carried to a higher point over there, though I do not consider the mind of the English poet nearly so interesting and vivid as that of the American poet. Conditions are rather easier in Europe—often too easy.

"Poets must work, and work hard. They must throw themselves heart and soul into their work. Anything worth achieving entails infinite self-sacrifice, devotion, absorption. Work is the secret. For this reason I am glad struggle in America is essential. It is for this reason I most sincerely hope that the path of our poets may not be made easy for them. The true poet is one who will forge ahead through whatever odds may be piled in his way. With the poet who complains that his 'artistic temperament' forbids his working to earn his daily bread I have absolutely no patience."

LIKES TO DISCUSS POETRY.

Amy Lowell was giving a small tea party at the St. Regis. She left her guests to talk with me about poetry. I liked to fancy that the hostess really preferred talking about poetry to drinking tea.

The interview was briskly crowded full of serious talk. Yes, the poet admitted, she felt that poetry was a very serious thing, and that it ought never to be considered except in a serious and thoughtful manner. I asked one of those cumbersome and usually futile questions:

"Can you define poetry for me?"

Miss Lowell considered it a moment quietly and then replied:

"No, I don't think I can define it. Poetry is like love or religion, and to be felt rather than analysed."

Coleridge attempted to define poetry. He said: "Poetry is the blossom and the fragrance of all human knowledge, human thoughts, human passions, emotions, language."

But, after all, when you have called poetry a blossom and a fragrance, have you attained a very much clearer understanding of it? I think Miss Lowell visions the "art of apprehending and interpreting ideas by the faculty of imagination" as clearly as Coleridge did. And, to be perfectly frank, her admission that poetry is not, in truth, to be defined as you would define the more graspable things of life, did not impress me as a less profound sentiment than that which went into the garden for a metaphor.

Having disposed of the Thing itself, we turned to aspects of poetry, and were directly absorbed in Miss Lowell's discussion of vers libre—a beautifully elastic term, which certainly implies the very newest and most emancipated, and yet which has its roots far back in very early fields of literature.

THE NEW IS VERY OLD.

"This vers libre," she declared, "which the poets of to-day are employing so strikingly, is to be found in the curious pre-Elizabethan 'Piers Plowman,' which Langland wrote about the year 1362. There are also scattering examples of it all down through the history of English poetry—in the work of Dryden, for example, and of Mathew Arnold."

Arnold brought us well into the midst of the nineteenth century, which is really only a step behind the twentieth. Therefore I asked Miss Lowell to classify for me the vers libre of to-day, and began by asking:

"Did Walt Whitman write vers libre?"

"No," she replied with an emphasis (which seemed also to imply the tacit plea: "I hope you will make much of this, too!") "Walt Whitman should not be esteemed in any sense the father of this new free movement in poetry, he did not write vers libre but rhythmic or metrical prose, in which choice, furthermore, he was merely following the metre of our King James Bible. The Bible is done in rhythmic prose, and so is the poetry of Walt Whitman, and so is that of Edward Carpenter, whose direct indebtedness to Whitman is, of course, obvious. But vers libre forms the opposite shore of that river of separation which may arbitrarily, and for our convenience, be thought of as flowing between poetry in its strict sense and prose in its strict sense.

From a Painting by Miss Sarah Putman.

Amy Lowell, Conspicuous in the "New School" of Poetry, Who Predicts a Great Future for Her Art in America.

"There is beauty at the heart of all phases of life, and the function of the poet is to sound that beauty."

* * *

"With the poet who complains that his 'artistic temperament' forbids his working to earn his daily bread I have absolutely no patience."

"In this manner we may look upon poetry and prose as the two extremes between which the pendulum of expression is forever swinging. There are two borderlines. That nearer the strict division of prose consists of this metrical prose of which Walt Whitman is a modern exponent, while that borderline nearer strict poetry is vers libre. This is a concise way to chart the differences, though, of course, such arbitrary divisions do not really exist at all."

"What," I next asked, "was the contribution of Sidney Lanier to modern verse form?"

"Lanier," she replied, "employed what we term quantitive verse, a verse wherein the balance is attained through a studied distribution of vowels and consonants."

"And the balance is vers libre?"

"The balance in vers libre is struck through cadence. It is not easy to reduce this balance to precise terms." She smiled, and seemed again thinking of the illusiveness of poetry itself. "Cadence is something which must be felt."

But she went on to assure me, as she has hitherto definitely pointed out in a preface to a volume of her own poems, that "cadence is built upon 'organic rhythm,' or the rhythm of the speaking voice with its necessity for breathing, rather than upon a strict metrical system. They differ from ordinary prose rhythms by being more curved, and containing more stress. The stress, and exceedingly marked curve, of any regular metre is easily perceived. Vers libre, built upon cadence, is more subtle, but the laws it follows are not less fixed. Merely chopping prose lines into lengths does not produce cadence. There are mathematical and absolute laws of balance and time."

Miss Lowell took up a little volume containing her "Sword Blades and Poppy Seeds," and, turning to a page, read an emphasis and conclusion to what she had been saying.

"The desire to 'quintessentialize,' to head-up an emotion until it burns white-hot, seems to be an integral part of the modern temper, and certainly 'unrhymed cadence' is unique in its power of expressing this."

THE QUANTITIVE VERSE.

In his marvellous "Sunrise" Sidney Lanier affords the following example of quantitive or vowel-consonant verse:

"Oh, what if a sound should be made!
Oh, what if a bound should be laid
To this bow-and-string tension of beauty and silence a-spring,
But no: It is made: list! somewhere, mystery, where?
In the leaves? in the air?
In my heart? is a motion made."

Walt Whitman gives us rhythmic or King James prose in passages like this:

"Why should I wish to see God better than this day?
I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then,
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass;
I find letters from God dropt in the street, and every one is signed by God's name."

Finally we have an example of vers libre in this fragment from Amy Lowell's "Captured Goddess":

"Over the housetops,
Above the rotating chimney pots,
I have seen a shiver of amethyst,
And blue and cinnamon have flickered
A moment,
At the far end of a dusty street."

And then Miss Lowell showed me, just by way of illustration, what havoc you can play with cadence verse if you turn it into prose—which can be done by simply twisting the words about, and so destroying the balance of the whole. This process was quite painful, and is better left to the imagination or personal experiment of the reader than rehearsed here.

Balance! That, it seemed, was the secret of vers libre.

"And is not balance the real secret of all poetry?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied," it is."

Before my brief and joyous half hour came to a conclusion and the jealous tea-time guests in the other apartment claimed Miss Lowell again, she touched upon other important things. For a moment she returned to that matter of distinguishing between this new free style in verse and the more orthodox or hackneyed forms.

"There is a certain machine," she said, "which is being perfected. It combines in some way the properties of the dictaphone and the magic lantern. Sound is thrown in dots and dashes upon the screen. It is a curious and quite ingenious device. Some day I mean to experiment with it. I mean to read poetry of all meters into the machine and see whether, when sound is visualized, I can arrive any nearer a concrete definition of vers libre."

"Do you think," I asked, willing to await the conclusive evidence of that experiment, and counting the golden remaining moments, "that this new movement in poetry is, in a way, an endeavor to break away from the fetters of the stylists, those who have always more or less confined utterance to forms already established?"

"Perhaps it is," she answered. "It is true, there are as many varieties of the vers libre as there are poets using it. When I write vers libre I employ a scheme of versification which is absolutely my own; whereas, should I use blank verse I should merely be using the style of versification sacred to Shakespeare, Milton, and so many of the worthies who have had their day. Still, we must not lose track of the unfortunate fact that a great many exponents of the new school of poetry are not worthy exponents. There are always many who insist upon reaching out after the bizarre, the exotic, the queer or grotesque, and the morbid. These do not catch the real spirit of poetry, and it is they who bring down reproach, oftentimes, upon a whole school."

"I believe," said I, "that I have one of your exotics right in my pocket." And I pulled out a poem purported to have been written by one of the coterie revolving about Paul Fort over in Paris, in those brave days prior to the outbreak of hostilities I read off the first couple of lines:

"The slimy glim of her opper ton
Slaned on the opper sen...."

She would not let me read any further, and I slipped the poem back out of sight.

"I should call that sheer nonesense!" she exclaimed. "And what is more, Paul Fort himself was never responsible for anything of that sort. Paul Fort is a genuine poet. Every word means something exact. Intelligence courses through each line."

And this latest enthusiasm on her part brought us finally to the book she has just written, and which has only within a few days been released by the publishers. It is an essay on six French poets: Emile Verhaeren, Albert Samain, Remy de Gourmont, Henri de Regnier, Francis Jammes, and Paul Fort. She showed me an advance copy. It is a thoughtful, comprehensive and most valuable contribution to modern criticism and appreciation.

An excellent instance of Miss Lowell's new polyphonic verse style may be drawn from a piece called "In a Castle."

"Over the yawning chimney hangs the fog.
Drip—hiss—drip—hiss—fall the raindrops on the oaken log which burns, and steams, and smokes the ceiling beams. Drip—hiss—the rain never stops."

"'Polyphonic prose,'" observed Miss Lowell, "is a term of my own invention. Paul Fort has as yet given no name to his form. With M. Fort it is almost always a question either of pure prose or pure verse, though both may appear in one stanza. In my polyphonic prose I seldom employ either completely."

"Where do you find inspiration?" I asked her, lingering upon the threshold of leave-taking.

"In life," she replied simply. "There is beauty at the heart of all phases of life, and the function of the poet is to sound that beauty and give it expression."

We shook hands, the door closed, and I had a swift sense of being wonderfully alone.

Now, if I have been unadroit in reducing this interview to type, I am going to ask Miss Lowell herself to plead in my behalf. What has she said of "The Bungler"?

"You glow in my heart
Like the flames of uncounted candles.
But when I go to warm my hands,
My clumsiness overturns the light,
And then I stumble
Against the tables and chairs!"

Are Women People?

By ALICE DUER MILLER

Which Shall It Be, Ladies?

("Most women prefer personal beauty to the ballot."—Philadelphia Inquirer.)

She hesitated long—a vote or beauty?
Which, in the end was likelier to pay?
Even old age can do its civic duty,
But beauty fades away.

Could she, perhaps, steer safely in the middle,
Be subtle, winning, interesting to men,
Pretty enough to play a second fiddle,
While voting now and then?

Or should she choose to be supremely stunning,
Fair as the leading lady in a show,
As Helen, Phryne, or the Misses Gunning,
And let the ballot go?

This was the choice she made—and wisely maybe
Except that really nothing much was gained,
Plain she had been, plain even as a baby,
And plain she still remained.

Do You Know?

That in Colorado, the terrible example of the antis, for every 100,000 of the population there are 154.2 in prison?

That in Massachusetts, so puritanical and conservative, there are 199.3?

That in Georgia, so fortunately untouched by the menace of woman suffrage, there are 231.3?

And that in the District of Columbia, uncorrupted by the franchise for either men or women, there are 237.7?

(Condensed from "The Woman's Journal," November 20, 1915.)

Try to Understand.

We hope there is no truth in the report that almost all of the many New Jersey women asked to serve on the Committee of One Hundred, which is arranging a celebration for the City of Newark's 250th birthday, refused to do so, on the ground that they had had it pointed out to them at a recent election that woman's place is the home.

We feel these women have not truly understood the minds of the men of New Jersey.

The men have no objection to women doing most of the work of civic committees, nor even to their working in public schools, factories and shops for 364 days in the year.

But on Election Day, no!

Woman's place is the home on Election Day.

A Gleam of Hope.

Well, we must not be discouraged.

Prejudice is breaking down.

Remember that a prominent financial journal has recently admitted editorially that "Not all women cheat at cards."

Adam Had the Idea.

A distinguished novelist from the Pacific Coast has decided, taking a hint from our first progenitor, that the faults of modern American fiction are due, not to men writers and publishers, but to feminine readers.

"The current novel is as deliberately planned to please the woman buyer as any other trade goods. . . . We want, says the publisher, a stunning girl for the cover. . . ."

We had always supposed stunning girls were of more interest to men than to women!

Shocking Duplicity.

The Texas Federation of Women's Clubs, by a two-thirds vote, and the Florida Federation, by a vote of 20 to 1, have gone on record as favoring woman suffrage.

Another of these deceptive efforts to make it appear as if the majority of women wanted the ballot.

Verbatim.

"I love my home," the Anti said,
"I crave no interests in its stead.
You think that foolish, I dare say—
Yes—I'm peculiar, in a way,
And so I must admit I do
Adore my home and children, too.
And, oh, I love my husband, though
You suffragists will sneer, I know.
I am not clever, and I fear
I do not make my meaning clear,
But what I'm trying to express
Is this: I love my home. Confess,
You think it very crude and silly
To love my little tots and Billy,
But yet I do—I think I ought—
I wonder if you catch my thought?"

Ill-Governed Nations Feed the Flames of War

Continued from page two.

looked for. The only remedy we can see now is the establishment of some kind of internationalism. Internationalism is not merely the dream of idealists. It is realizable, but it depends upon sound machinery and the shrewd use of human motives.

"An international legislature to maintain control over each major arena of friction might solve the present problem, but it will have to be a legislature with power sufficient to enforce the laws which it passes. Miniature world governments of this sort have been partially tried, notably at Algeciras. Diplomats saw this need so clearly that they have at various times established international conferences. At these conferences an attempt was made to frame laws which would carry out the ideals of the Open Door. So far, so good. What happened, though? The laws were passed all right, but they were never carried out. Why weren't they carried out? Because the executive power was always national, although the legislature itself was international. It was very much as though the United States government were to pass laws and then leave it to the various state governments to carry them out. The result was inevitable: the conferences failed to realize their purpose.

"The Conference at Algeciras was an international legislature in which even the United States was represented; the London Conference, after the Balkan wars, was a gathering of Ambassadors trying to legislate out of existence the sources of European trouble in the Balkans. But these legislatures had one great fault. They met, they passed laws, they adjourned, and left the enforcement of their mandates to the conscience of the individual powers. The legislature, though international, had no way of checking up or controlling the executive, which was national. The translation of laws into practice was left to colonial bureaucrats of some one nation.

"Now, the beginnings of a remedy would seem to lie in not disbanding these European conferences when they have passed a law. They ought to continue in existence as a kind of senate, meeting from time to time. They ought to regard themselves as watching over the legislation which they have passed. What would be the effect if the nations were able to establish these miniature or local world governments? The effect would be, you see, to destroy friction and open the door to commerce.

"A merchant who went to trade in Morocco, for example, would be in the same position as the merchant who went to trade in Germany. He could not secure any sort of control or bring about any sort of political 'problem.' To-day the very worst and most lawless sort of adventurers can drag their country into war simply by entering one of the arenas of friction and there personally involving the home government in a point of national honor. Under a competent world legislature, capable of carrying out its own decrees, such provocations would be altogether removed.

"Of course the nations entering into an international conference must stand loyal to that conference. Unless the national governments are willing to say that investments and markets abroad must not look for protection at home, there is no incentive to strengthen the international government in the backward state.

"In other words, the people at home must say to their foreign traders and capitalists: 'When you enter territory which is internationally organized, you are expected to obey its laws and look to it for protection. We have backed you up hitherto because no adequate government existed in these backward states. Now it does exist, and we are no longer under any obligation to risk wars in order to protect you.'

"If the world is to be saved from the hideous clashing of empires it must establish a world control in the territories where the clashes occur. The effect would be to blur frontiers, to diminish the sense of sovereignty and weaken separatism. The really internationalizing forces of finance, commerce, labor, science, and human sympathy, distracted and distorted to-day by 'national necessities,' would be given a freer chance to assert themselves.

"Algeciras, though a failure, is a great precedent, the most hopeful effort at world organization made up to the present. I venture to say that if the spirit of the Algeciras act had been realized it would have been more important than all the Hague rules about how to fight in 'civilized' fashion, all the arbitration treaties, all the reduction of armanent proposals with which the earth is deluged. Algeciras grasped the problem of diplomacy—the conflict of empires in weak territory. Algeciras gallantly tried to introduce a world government to control it. The men at Algeciras failed. If we cannot succeed where they failed the outlook for the future is desperate."